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ABSTRACT

This paper reports an investigation of a timetabled session in a self-access center with a General English program. Five classes were observed for three weeks to determine how the available time was actually used. Learners' opinions on the purpose and usefulness of the session were also sought. The most frequently observed activity overall was reading, but learner activities varied according to level of class. Although learners' opinions of the timetabled session seem favorable, questions are raised about the resourcing, lay-out and accessibility of the center and about the issues of learner-training and teacher-training for self access. (Author)

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AN INVESTIGATION OF A TIMETABLED SELF-ACCESS SESSION IN A GENERAL ENGLISH PROGRAMME

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Abstract

This paper reports an investigation of a timetabled session in a self-access centre within a General English programme. Five classes were observed for three weeks to determine how the available time was actually used. Learners' opinions on the purpose and usefulness of the session were also sought. The most frequently observed activity overall was reading but learner activities varied according to level of class. Although learners' opinions of the timetabled session seem favourable, questions are raised about the resourcing, lay-out and accessibility of the centre and about the issues of learner-training and teacher-training for self-access.

1. Introduction

Over the last fifteen years, numerous self-access centres and self- instructional systems have been established in various institutions, based on the assumption that such centres and systems assist language learning. Reports on these systems, however, have tended to focus on descriptions of functions and procedures rather than on what individual learners do and what they spend their time on eg. the systems described in Dickinson (1987: 43-58) and the report on the student access centre of the Instituto Anglo-Mexicano de Cultura (Maxwell-Hyslop and McAlpin 1982).

Although there are some case studies (Stanchina and Riley 1978) which offer some insights into individual learner behaviour, there appear to be no studies which focus specifically on learner behaviour in, and learner perceptions of, a timetabled session in a self-access centre within the framework of a conventional General English taught course. An exception is a study by St. John at Aston University (1988) in the closely-related field of EAP. Over an academic year, she examined the attitudes of ESP students towards a time-tabled self-access system, and her conclusions were that their perceptions of the value of such a session became less positive as the year progressed and their needs became more specific.

2. Scope and aims of this study

This paper reports an investigation which was undertaken to find out how learners used a timetabled session in a self-access centre (the Study Room: see Figure 1), and their perceptions of the purpose and usefulness of these sessions in language learning.

The learners were attending a General English language course of 11 weeks consisting of 20 hours timetabled tuition per week (see Appendix). This includes one 90-minute session a week in the Study Room with their class teacher, where they can use

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the materials and facilities and have individual discussion with their teacher. The Study Room is also available for self-access use outside class, with no teacher present, but this was not the area under investigation.

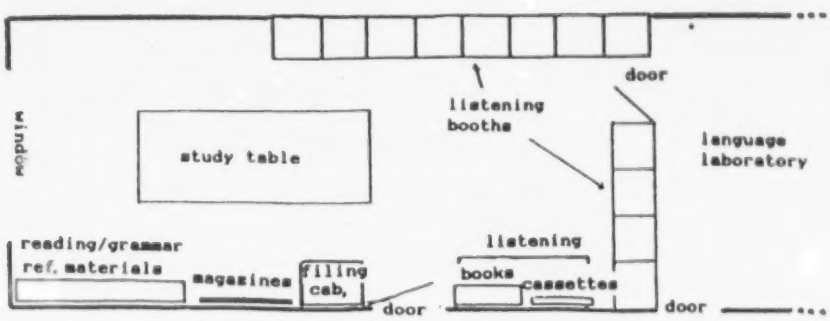

Figure 1: The Study Room

A self-access session has been timetabled into the General English programme for several years. It was assumed that it would assist language learning by giving students the opportunity not only to work on their own, at their own pace, on activities of their own choice but also to have individual access to their teacher. It appeared, however, from informal observation of learner behaviour during the session, and from comments by students and teachers, that some students were not always involved in what teachers would define as 'work' (e.g. sleeping) and that some teachers were uneasy about the management of the session.

We decided, therefore, to investigate what learners do during this timetabled session and whether they perceive it as helpful in their language learning. We also felt it was important in language teaching to evaluate everyday practices and reflect on their value and effectiveness in language learning. We undertook a small-scale study of (i) learner activities in the Study Room session (ii) learner perceptions of its purpose and usefulness in language learning.

3. Research method

Length of study: The investigation took place over a period of three weeks. Five classes were observed three times each.

Subjects: A total of 40 learners were involved, age range 19-35, of various nationalities, from both professional and student backgrounds. This represented the whole student body at the time attending General English either full-time or part-time in combination with Business English. There were five classes of four levels - Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate, Upper-Intermediate 1 and 2, and Advanced.

The students were advised of the study from the outset, and as the researchers were regular teachers and known to all the learners, it is believed that learner behaviour and responses were not seriously affected ('the Hawthorne effect'), though this cannot be entirely discounted.

Data collection instruments: It was decided that a range of instruments were required in order to obtain data of both an objective nature (observation sheet, student records of work) and a more subjective nature (interviews and questionnaires). It was also felt advisable to triangulate data collection in order to try to ensure maximum reliability.

a. Observation instrument

The design of the observation system (see Figure 2 below) was decided on after, firstly, informal live and video-recorded observations of learner activities in the Study Room and, secondly, considerations of a practical nature - the management of real-time coding of a whole class (maximum 12 students) within one 90-minute session.

What we observed of learner behaviour suggested the dimensions and categories to include in the instrument. Real-time coding was chosen in preference to recorded observation so that a more comprehensive picture of behaviour in the Study Room session would be obtained; and a fixed-interval coding system of 5-minute time units was adopted so that the predominant observable behaviour of each student in the class could be noted every five minutes. Thus, disregarding the first five minutes, 17 recordings for each student were made during each Study Room session.

We recognised that such a system would lead to only partial recording of events as changes of learner behaviour within the 5-minute time unit would be lost. However, the sequence of events would be preserved and the general pattern of behaviour retained, and areas of doubt or missing information could be clarified or supplied by information on the other data collection instruments.

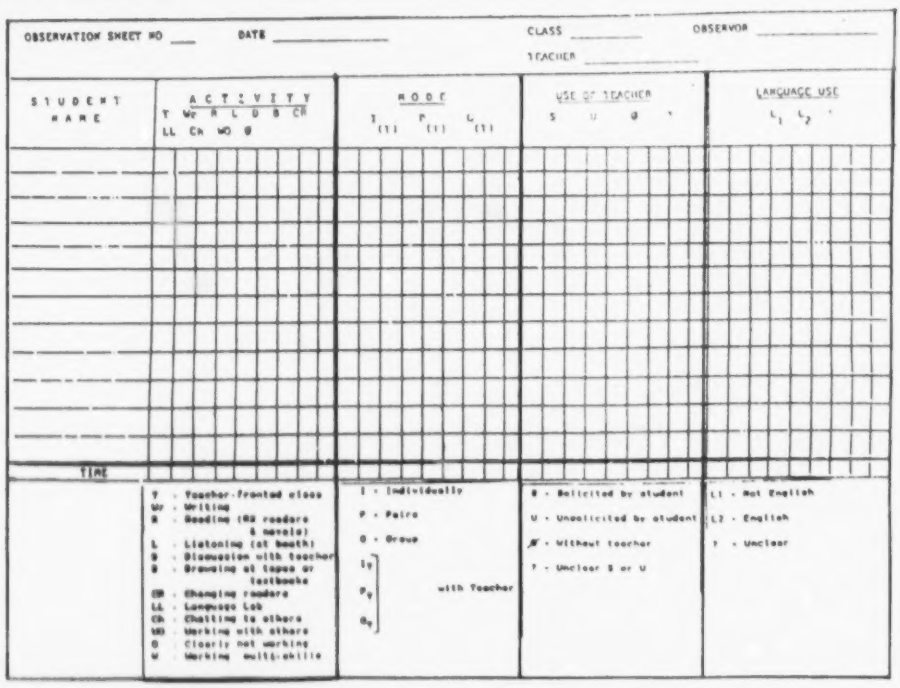
OBSERVATION SHEET NO ___ DATE _____ CLASS _____ OBSERVOR _____
TEACHER _____
STUDENT NAME
ACTIVITY
T Wr R L D S CR
LL Ch WO 0
MODE
I (1) P (1) G (1)
USE OF TEACHER
S U 0 ?
LANGUAGE USE
L1 L2 ?
TIME
T - Teacher-fronted class
Wr - Writing
R - Reading (RR readers & novels)
L - Listening (at booth)
D - Discussion with teacher
S - Browsing at tapes or textbooks
CR - Changing readers
LL - Language Lab
Ch - Chatting to others
WO - Working with others
0 - Clearly not working
W - Working multi-skills
I - Individually
P - Pairs
G - Group
with Teacher
S - Solicited by student
U - Unsolicited by student
0 - Without teacher
? - Unclear S or U
L1 - Not English
L2 - English
? - Unclear

Figure 2: Observation Instrument - a fixed-interval category system

Note: The multi-skills category /W/ represents activity where the learner is using a variety of texts such as dictionary, grammar book, reference book and is also reading and writing. The Language Laboratory is en suite with the Study Room.

We recognised that the categories of the Activity dimension were of a mixed nature, i.e. specific skill areas (Wr, L, R), location (LL) and modes (T-fronted, discussion with T), but it was decided to retain these as they reflected what actually went on in the Study Room. We also recognised that some categories were low-inference items, while others were high-inference, requiring some interpretation and judgement from the coder, but we considered that close examination of students' work would be too intrusive. We believe that the information recorded here, when combined with data in the other dimensions, provides a fairly clear picture of the Study Room at any one time.

b. Narrative description

Although the focus of the investigation was on learner activity in the Study Room, the role of the teacher could not be discounted because of her possible effect on student behaviour in this session. Consequently, a second, subjective observation sheet was kept by another observer - a narrative account which focused mainly on the behaviour of the teacher but also, obviously, included a description of some learners. The account was a 'running commentary' and therefore not divided into fixed time units.

c. Record of work

A Record of Work for learners to fill in after each Study Room session was designed in order to (a) have access to the students' perceptions of what they were in fact doing and (b) be able to see where the observer's and the students' recordings of that work differed.

The Record of Work required the learner's recording of three areas; (a) the activities engaged in, (b) the materials used and (c) the time spent on each activity and the mode of working.

The final version was the result of several trials in which accessibility for all levels of learners and acceptability (i.e. that they would not refuse to fill it in) were the main priorities. The categories of work, therefore, are fewer in number and less complex than those on the Observation instrument and the time spent on activities was recorded using the categories *All/Most/Some (of total time)*.

d. Interview

A semi-structured interview format was designed, the open-ended questions reflecting the overall objective of exploring students' perceptions of the purpose and usefulness of the Study Room session. It also included questions on out-of-class use of the Study Room and suggestions for improvement (see Appendix).

Two students - different ones after each session - were asked to stay behind at the end of the Study Room sessions to be interviewed by the observer and another teacher. Not all the students in the study were interviewed, however, due to absences and early departures from the course.

e. Post- observation data collection

All members of the General English staff were asked to fill in an open-ended questionnaire giving their perceptions of the purpose of the Study Room session, their management of it, and their suggestions for improvement (see Appendix).

4. Discussion of Results

4.1 Range of activities in the Study Room

The learners took part in a wide range of activities. The diagrams below (Figures 3 and 4) highlight the activities on which the most time was spent across all classes over the three week period.

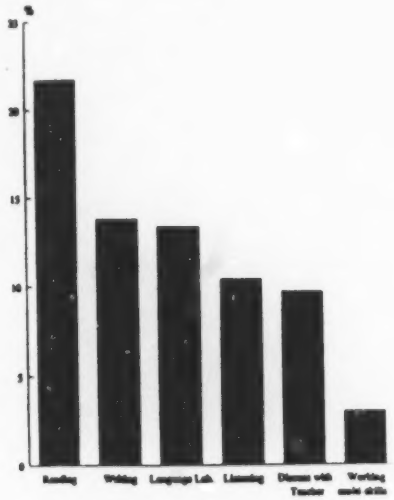

Figure 3: Proportion of time spent on major activities across all classes. Data based on Observation Instrument.

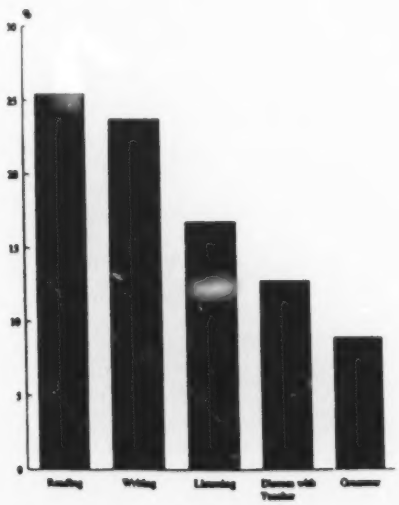

Figure 4: Proportion of time spent on major activities across all classes. Data based on Records of Work.

Reading

Reading was the most frequent activity for all levels but very little time was spent reading graded readers or novels, of which there is a small collection available. From the student Records of Work, it appears that the 'reading time' consisted of reading newspaper articles, reference books (including grammar books), textbooks, and students' own essays.

This lack of extensive reading may be accounted for by the fact that graded readers and novels are the only material in the Study Room which can be borrowed for home use, and the loan forms for readers indicate that a certain number of books are regularly borrowed, particularly by lower-level learners. But it may also reflect a lack of emphasis put on extensive reading during the timetabled session by teachers. As reading of this kind can be done at home, teachers may feel that learners could more usefully spend their time in the session on other activities, including individual discussions with teachers.

We can speculate that 'study reading' is common across all classes, although slightly less so at Pre-Intermediate level, because it provides a change of pace from group activity-based classwork, the opportunity for students to tackle a text on their own at their own pace and a chance to obtain information from reference books for project work.

Listening

There is a difference between levels with regard to listening (see Figure 5).

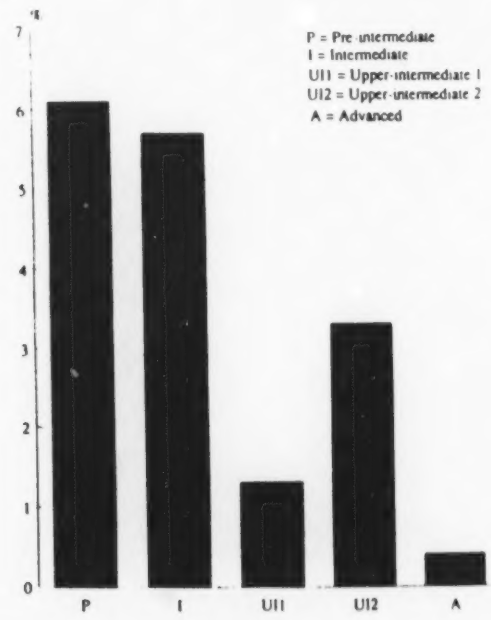

Figure 5: Proportion of time spent on listening by each class. Data based on Records of Work.

The data in the Observation instrument differs from that in the Records of Work because in the former, the category /L/ (listening) referred to listening at the booths in the Study Room, and the category / LL / (Language laboratory) referred only to movement by students into the Language laboratory and not what went on there, as this area was not included in our investigation. The Records of Work, however, confirmed by data in the student interviews, revealed that students also did 'listening' in the Language Laboratory.

We can see that listening is more frequent at the lower levels and that there is a marked decrease as we move up the ability scale. This may be due to the difficulty lower-level learners experience with listening outside the classroom in the English-speaking environment; conversation, television and film will be less accessible to them than to those with a higher proficiency in English.

Listening in the Study Room session gives them the opportunity to work at their own pace on materials at their level and with a tapescript; listening material is accessible and, on the whole, user-friendly. Moreover, learners are less likely to be disturbed by others, including the teacher, once ensconced at a booth. Perhaps listening is perceived as the 'easiest' option for learners at this level.

Learners at the higher levels, in contrast, are able to cope more easily with real-life listening. In class, a wider range of authentic material is used with them and there is less general material for them in the Study Room. They may also have other priorities. The figures for the second Upper-Intermediate class, however, indicate a greater proportion of time spent on listening than the other high level classes. This was due to two particular students who felt very weak in listening and spent almost all the time on listening practice so skewing the results.

Writing

There is also a difference between levels in the amount of time spent on writing (see Figures 6 and 7), with the most marked difference between Pre-Intermediate and the other levels.

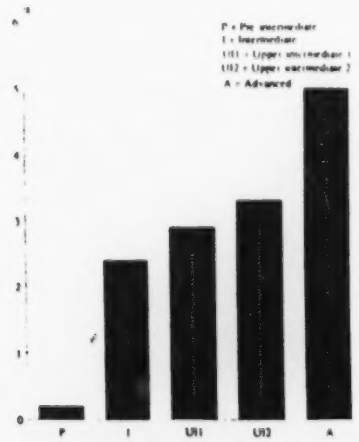

Figure 6: Proportion of time spent on writing by each class. Data based on Observation instrument.

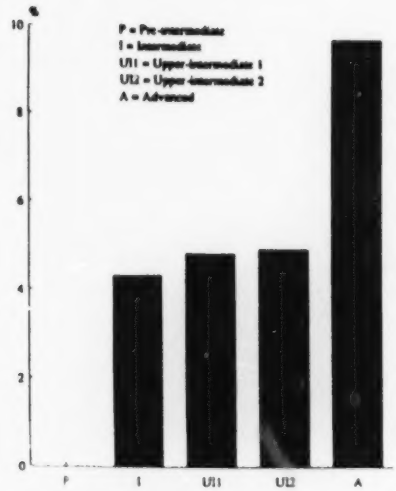

Figure 7: Proportion of time spent on writing by each class. Data based on Records of Work.

There is a difference in the proportions between the two sets of figures because the coding on the Observation Instrument under the category /W/ (multi-skills work) will have included some writing, while learners recorded what they perceived as the predominant activity even if it involved other skills. Nevertheless, the patterns are similar - little or no writing at Pre-Intermediate level, with an increase in the proportion of time spent on writing at the higher levels.

This is perhaps not surprising. For Pre-Intermediate learners, writing is not only more difficult as an individual activity but is of low priority in comparison to listening and speaking. In class time, writing done at Pre-Intermediate level tends to be more structured, of shorter length and involves a cooperative approach. In the upper levels, though a cooperative approach may be used initially, it remains an essentially solitary activity and the Study Room provides the opportunity for access to the teacher for advice and to reference books for consultation; the latter would not be easily accessible to lower-level learners. Moreover, learners in the higher level classes often undertake individual research projects and may have special needs such as examinations or writing tasks for Business English.

Grammar

There is a difference between levels with regard to the proportion of time spent on grammar (see Figure 8), with the most marked difference at Pre-Intermediate and Intermediate levels.

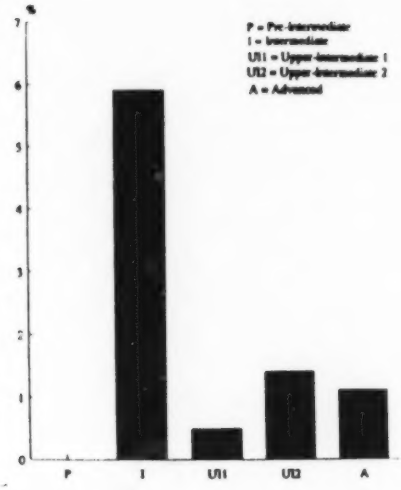

Figure 8: Proportion of time spent on grammar by each class. Data based on Records of Work.

It can be seen that the Pre-Intermediate level spends no time on grammar, whereas Intermediate learners spend the greatest amount of time on it. There is very little grammar material available in the Study Room for lower levels, particularly in self-access format, whereas there is a wide range for Intermediate level upwards. We should point out, however, that all learners are issued with a grammar book for self-access use by another class teacher and that the coursebooks have grammar reference sections and exercises. We can assume, therefore, that grammar work is done by many learners across levels outside the Study Room session.

Moreover, from our teaching experience, we have found that higher level learners tend to be more interested in expanding their knowledge of vocabulary and idioms or discussing the finer points in structure in class with the teacher - points which are generally not covered so effectively in grammar books.

That grammar figures so highly at Intermediate level is interesting, however. This may be because many learners at this level have reached a 'plateau' and studying grammar is perceived as one concrete way of making progress; or they consider, now that they are living in an English-speaking country, that their previous knowledge of grammar is inadequate.

4.2 Perceptions of the purpose and usefulness of the Study Room session.

4.2.1 Purpose

Overall, learner perceptions of the purpose of the Study Room do not differ from our own. In an open-ended question in the interview on what they saw as the purpose of the Study Room session, 50% of the students specifically mentioned the

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opportunity to work on their own and follow their own needs and interests, and to have individual access to the teacher:

> "the teacher is there to help if necessary which is very useful"
> "students can do what they want with some guidance from the teacher initially"
> "students have different needs - can correct own faults"
> "students need individual study time and to be able to choose what they want to do"

Other responses include the opportunity it provides for language practice on systems and skills, to discover new things, and to familiarise themselves with material and facilities. Affective factors were also mentioned, such as, "a chance to relax", and "peaceful atmosphere".

The data shows that the learners do spend most of their time working individually. But, of course, this does not mean that the teacher is inactive for although no individual student spends a long time talking to the teacher, the teacher often spends the entire session talking to individual students. Also, learner perceptions of discussions with the teacher differ from ours; one student who had spent at least 30 minutes with his teacher talking about his essay in fact recorded this as 'writing'.

The data also shows that most of the work in the Study Room is determined by the learner rather than the teacher and confirms the students' comments on the opportunity "to do what they want". This does not take into account, however, that learners may have been recommended to work on particular areas of language by other class teachers and that, at the beginning of term, all students had been introduced to the Study Room and may have been directed towards material appropriate for their needs and interests.

However, the comments by the learners may represent an ideal view of the Study Room session. The students will have had previous experience of some kind of library or study room and that experience, combined with the name 'Study Room' will have raised certain expectations as to the nature of the session. One student commented "The name 'Study' leads you to work."

In response to the question on what teachers saw as the purpose of the Study Room session, all of them mentioned the same positive points as the learners, i.e. the opportunity for learners to work on their own and develop independence, follow their own needs and interests and to have individual discussions with the students.

However, discussions between teacher and students tend to be more teacher-initiated than learner-initiated and this is confirmed by data in the Observation Instrument, the narrative accounts and in the teacher questionnaires. This may reflect a general underlying unease, as expressed by one teacher, "if I just sit and do nothing" or it may be due more to the personality and personal philosophy of the teacher - that she should create opportunities for talk about students' work or even personal matters - "I use the time for 'tutorials' - probably more useful for providing attention rather than helping all that much." It might also reflect a desire on the part of the teachers to ensure that students are using the time 'fruitfully'.

The teachers, too, may have an ideal view since various anxieties were also expressed as to the management of it and some aspects of learner behaviour. A few teachers commented that there may be some resistance from some learners to "a non-teacher-fronted class session" and that there are some learners who are unable to determine for themselves what to do. Other teachers mentioned the need for some kind of "training" of learners for more self-directed learning:

> "I feel many learners don't benefit as much as they could - perhaps they need more direction".
> "It will never work with some students unless more time is spent on 'training' them".

The ideal view versus reality is aptly summed up by one teacher ;

> "There is a two-way pull: one way, we wish to give them a free hand in what they choose to do; the other, we want to ensure that their time isn't wasted. The problem with 'learner training' is the attempt to reconcile these two in this environment."

The anxieties expressed by this teacher were not confirmed in the students' data. Only two learners were unsure of what the purpose of the Study Room session was; one because he did "the same things here with or without the teacher present", the other felt it was boring sometimes because "I'm not good at organising myself".

Nor were there any negative comments in the students' data about the teacher's role or behaviour, although it is clear from the narrative description that behaviour differed among teachers in terms of whether they sat and waited for students to approach them or whether they moved among the students, talking to some of them. This behaviour may relate to the language level of the class concerned but it may be due more to the personality and the personal philosophy of the teacher, as mentioned above.

4.2.2 Usefulness

Overall, learner responses to a question on the usefulness (i.e. that they learn something) of the Study Room session were favourable.

YES	25
NO/NOT REALLY	3
NOT SURE	3
SOMETIMES	2

The reasons given frequently overlapped with the responses to the question on the purpose of the Study Room. A few students, however, said that they had found it more useful when they first came than now. These tended to be long-term students i.e. those who had come the previous term; they may have exhausted the available material or it may be because they were not as strongly motivated as previously. Such comments echo, in part, the findings of St. John (1988) but they may also be due to the fact that the students had devised alternative strategies for improving their English, strategies which they had developed while living in an English-speaking environment, involving contact with native speakers.

Although the overall response to the questions on the purpose and usefulness of the Study Room session was favourable, this does not mean that there is no scope for improvement. More than 50% of the learners requested additional materials for both language practice and reading, especially unsimplified novels, and reference books of a general non-EFL type. More listening material was specifically requested by Pre-Intermediate level students.

Other suggestions included improvement to the lay-out, such as small tables for individual study, a better cataloguing system, and regular checking of faulty tapes and equipment. Self-access video facilities were also requested by several students. No student stated that the time-tabled Study Room session should be abolished !

5. Conclusion

The research team asked two questions. What do learners do in the Study Room session? What are their perceptions of the purpose and usefulness of the session in language learning?

Though the sample is small and we must be cautious about the claims we make, we can see that what learners do in the Study Room session depends on their level, their needs and on the materials available: reading is common across all levels; a greater proportion of time is spent on listening by lower-level learners; and writing assumes greater importance among higher-level learners.

The data reveals that the learners see the session as helpful to them as language learners - an opportunity for individually- determined private work and as a chance to consult the teacher. However, some of the choices made by the students may reflect the learners' own ability to work independently or be influenced by either another class teacher's advice or the present class teacher's behaviour.

All this has implications for the resourcing of the Study Room, e.g. a continued development of listening materials for lower levels. In addition, the unease expressed by teachers on their management of and student use of the session raises the question of the need for learner- and teacher-training for self-access. Whether timetabled Study Room sessions actually assist language learning, as opposed to perceptions that they do, can only be determined by some future empirical investigation.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

A: The General English timetable

Session A (9.15 - 10.45 am) Understanding and using grammar and vocabulary and developing reading skills.
Session B (11.15 - 12.45 pm) Developing listening, writing and study skills.
Session C (2.00 - 3.40 pm) Developing speaking skills through a variety of activities including projects which allow students to meet local people.

B. Student interview

1. Do you feel you have learned anything in the Study Room session today?
2. What do you feel is the purpose of the 11.15 session in the Study Room?
3a. Do you feel the 11.15 session helps you to learn English?

If yes - How? If no - why not?

3b. Do you do anything else to help you learn English?
4. Do you use the Study Room at any other times?
5. Do you have any suggestions for improving the Study Room?

C. Teacher questionnaire

1. What do you think is the purpose of the 11.15 SR session?
2. Have you any comments to make about the 11.15 session with a particular class?
3. How do you feel the session actually works (as opposed to the theory of it)? How comfortable do you feel about managing such a session?
4. What do you think about the present layout, resources etc of S.R.?